

Empirically Based Leadership

Integrating the Science of Psychology in Building a Better Leadership Model

Major Sean P. McDonald, U.S. Army



THERE ARE VERY few tasks in the Army more important than developing effective, competent leaders. As a significant part of this effort, the Army provides Field Manual (FM) 6-22, which establishes leadership doctrine and fundamental principles to guide leaders at all levels. In support of this important objective, the manual offers a comprehensive framework for leadership that explicitly outlines the highly valued characteristics and competencies all leaders are expected to aspire to and emulate. However, as valuable as this framework may be, much of its content is based upon intuition and experience. As expressed in FM 6-22, the manual “combines the lessons of the past with important insights” in establishing a model for competent leadership.¹

While this approach has value, it has a significant limitation that potentially overlooks other highly influential factors. Similar to flaws in relying exclusively on anecdotal evidence, empirical literature is absent or lacking emphasis in FM 6-22. Further, certain characteristics or competencies are more important than others depending on the context. These limitations in the FM suggest a review of relevant research is necessary to enhance the Army’s current model of leadership.

I will identify those empirically based factors most important to a model of influential, competent leadership in this article. Three areas require further exploration. First, I will compare relevant research on key individual characteristics or traits of effective leadership to those characteristics established within FM 6-22. Second, I will examine the contemporary research on leadership psychology, which has placed greater emphasis on social context over individual traits in effective leadership. Finally, in light of this analysis, I look at possible improvements to the Army’s current model of leadership as part of the broader effort to cultivate a better understanding. While experience and intuition are valuable sources of information, integrating relevant empiricism into the process is necessary for a more complete model of leadership.

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Leaders from Task Force Brawler, 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade, TF Falcon, simulate combat stress prior to participating in reflexive-fire drills at the small arms range, Forward Operating Base Shank, Afghanistan, 19 February 2009 (U.S. Army, Sgt. Scott Tant)

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Individual Characteristics of Effective Leadership

The possession of certain individual characteristics is a critical element of the Army's leadership model as expressed in the simple phrase, "what leaders DO emerges from who they are (BE) and what they KNOW."² According to this conceptual framework, particular attributes along with appropriate knowledge serve as the foundation from which desired competencies emerge. In other words, certain characteristics are an essential aspect to being an effective leader, and in their absence, desirable competencies will not fully develop. While the identification of necessary attributes is valuable in structuring and communicating the expectations for leadership, what remains unclear is the validity of the inclusion or exclusion of particular characteristics beyond the basis of intuition and experience.

Field Manual 6-22 identifies 12 individual characteristics necessary to competent leadership, organized into three categories: character, presence, and intellectual capacity. Analyzing all 12 characteristics is beyond the scope of this paper, so the discussion in this section will primarily focus

on the key areas of interest within the empirical literature on leadership characteristics or traits. The first major area involves ethical reasoning, which most closely aligns with the category of character defined by FM 6-22: "A person's moral and ethical qualities help determine what is right and gives a leader motivation to do what is appropriate."³

Based on this definition, there is little doubt that ethical reasoning is a critically important area within the Army's model of leadership. The consequences, both good and bad, of moral reasoning carry far greater weight in leaders than in followers. In the context of life and death situations, this is especially so.⁴ However, what is less known or understood is the effect of ethical reasoning on leadership performance, which is generally assessed by the attainment of goals or objectives within a leadership context.⁵

Leanne E. Atwater, Shelly D. Dionne, John F. Camobreco, Bruce J. Avolio, and Alan Lau (1998) examine the relationship between moral reasoning of U.S. military cadets and their development and effectiveness as leaders as ranked by both their peers and supervisors.⁶ Not surprisingly, these researchers found that higher levels of moral



(DOD, SGT David Bill)

CPT John Alderman (left) commander of Echo Troop, 108th Cavalry, talks with embedded reporter Gray Beverly (center) and CPT Michael Lipper, commander of HHC 48th BCT, during a convoy stop at Navistar, Kuwait, 7 June 2005 .

reasoning were related to leader effectiveness in obtaining established objectives, which subsequent studies have supported.⁷

In examining this relationship in a slightly different light, Nick Turner, Julian Barling, and Olga Epitropaki (2002) postulate those leaders with higher moral reasoning would be perceived as more transformational than leaders who exhibited lower moral reasoning. Transformational leadership is defined as a style of leadership that inspires followers to look beyond self-interests for the good of the group as opposed to transactional leadership that motivates followers through corrective transactions, which is based more on reward and punishment. These researchers developed their hypothesis from moral development theory, which asserts that leaders with more complex moral reasoning will be able to use greater sophisticated conceptualizations of interpersonal situations. Such leaders are more likely to think about problems in different ways and are cognizant of a larger number of behavioral options. Consequently, leaders with more complex moral reasoning are more likely to value goals that go beyond immediate self-interest and to foresee the benefits of actions that serve the collective good (i.e., transformational leadership). The outcome of the study found a significant relationship between higher moral development and transformational leadership.⁸

While the collective outcome of these studies is not particularly surprising, an understanding of the professional literature in this category remains an important element in developing a model for leadership. To some, such an analysis would seem to be a pointless endeavor considering the obvious need for sound ethical decision making, especially for the military leader who frequently confronts complex “gray” situations. However, the science on the topic not only refines our understanding of the role of ethics within leadership, but more importantly, these studies provide critical insight on the need for ethical and moral development among leaders to obtain the greatest outcomes related to leader performance.

Another significant area of interest within the empirical literature

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is emotional intelligence (EI), which in recent years has been the focus of considerable attention in relationship to leadership efficacy. Emotional intelligence involves an awareness of one’s own emotions as well as the ability to control them, social awareness of others and their emotions, and the capacity to understand and manage relationships and social networks.⁹ Based on this description, EI is relevant to all three categories of Army leader attributes, especially the attributes of empathy and interpersonal tact. In discussing empathy, FM 6-22 defines it as “the ability to see something from another person’s point of view, to identify with and enter into another person’s feelings and emotions.”¹⁰ Empathy is not typically a quality that most soldiers would readily identify as an essential characteristic to effective leadership or necessary to producing positive organizational outcomes. Further, FM 6-22 tends to reflect this perception. The manual devotes only four paragraphs to discussing empathy. However, the research in this area suggests it is an important quality for competent leadership, especially as it relates to EI.

In examining this characteristic, one study analyzed the relationship between EI and leadership effectiveness among U.S. Navy human resource officers.¹¹ The researchers administered a measure of EI, which provided four subscales: perceiving emotions, facilitating thought, understanding emotions (both in self and others), and ability to manage emotions. The researchers then compared scores to managerial performance. Results from the study revealed a positive and significant correlation between the officers’ overall emotional intelligence and effectiveness as a leader. More specifically, when analyzing the subscales, the researchers detected significant relationship on facilitating thought, understanding emotions, and ability to manage them to leadership effectiveness. In understanding others emotions, an important contributing factor to the success of the more effective officers was their ability to empathize with their subordinates.¹²

In another study, researchers conducted a meta-analysis to ascertain if a consistent,

research-based link could be established between EI and effective leadership. A meta-analysis is a particularly powerful study because it statistically analyzes the outcomes of a large collection of research results for the purpose of integrating the findings versus relying upon the results of a single study. Based upon the analysis of 48 studies examining this relationship, results of the meta-analysis suggested a strong relationship between EI and leadership effectiveness.¹³ While there have been some studies that have minimized this relationship, the empirical data strongly supports the inclusion of EI characteristics within a model of leadership best designed to produce competent leaders.

A third area of considerable interest in the empirical literature is the trait of hardiness or resiliency and its relationship to leadership effectiveness. As part of the Army's model of leadership, the characteristic of resiliency is listed as one of the 12 attributes of a competent leader. Field Manual 6-22 describes resilient leaders as those who "recover quickly from setbacks, shock, injuries, adversity, and stress while maintaining their mission and organizational focus. Their resilience rests on will, the inner drive that compels them to keep going, even when exhausted, hungry, afraid, cold, and wet. Resilience helps leaders and their organizations to carry difficult missions to their conclusion."¹⁴ Unfortunately, FM 6-22's description of resiliency contained in four short paragraphs primarily revolves around its application to combat with little discussion on its relevance to leadership within a broader context.¹⁵

Prior to discussing the research on resiliency or hardiness, it is important to discuss its conceptual framework. While FM 6-22 characterizes resiliency as a behavior, the professional literature generally considers it an element of personality that develops early in life and is relatively stable over time, although amenable to change and trainable under certain conditions. Hardy or resilient persons have a high sense of life and work commitment, a feeling of control, and are open to change and challenges in life. They tend to interpret stressful and painful experiences as a normal aspect of existence, part of what makes life interesting and worthwhile.¹⁶ Although there is some consistency with the description provided by FM 6-22, the important difference is that it contains a broader application extending well beyond a particular context (e.g., combat). With this

understanding established, the research on the topic can now be more intelligently examined.

An extensive body of research has accumulated demonstrating that resiliency and hardiness acts as a protective factor against stress while increasing performance. In one study, researchers examined personality factors, psychological hardiness, and social judgment (an element of EI) as predictors of leader performance. The researchers analyzed data collected over four years on West Point cadets and graduates. Although they analyzed a number of different factors relevant to leadership performance, hardiness emerged as the strongest predictor of performance in a variety of contexts over more commonly associated qualities like mental abilities or emotional intelligence.¹⁷ Similar results have been obtained in other studies with a variety of occupational groups. In addition to moderating against combat exposure in Gulf War soldiers, hardiness has emerged as a stress buffer in other populations such as U.S. Army casualty assistance workers, peacekeeping soldiers, Israeli soldiers in combat training, officer candidates, and members of the Special Forces.¹⁸ This data strongly supports the inclusion of resiliency or hardiness as a necessary element of competent leadership.



COL Todd Ebel (left), commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, looks over a weapons cache with LTC Rob Haycock, commander, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 21 February 2006. (U.S. Army, SPC Kelly McDowell)

The final characteristic is intellectual capacity, which has been a longstanding area of interest in relation to job performance. Field Manual 6-22 makes a similar connection between intellect and performance in its definition of intellectual capacity: “mental resources or tendencies that shape a leaders’ conceptual abilities and *impact effectiveness*.”¹⁹ The interest in this relationship intuitively makes sense: as leaders gain responsibility, they generally experience greater demands in the complexity of problems therefore requiring greater intellectual capacity. However, while there is validity to competent leaders possessing higher intellect, recent studies suggest that the impact of intelligence to improved performance as a leader is generally moderated by other factors not directly related to intelligence. In other words, even though intelligence is important to leadership, it makes little difference in isolation unless a leader is able to effectively complement their intellectual capacity with other important characteristics.²⁰

For example, the quality of resiliency is an extremely important moderator in the pragmatic manifestation of intelligence within a leadership role. In a review of professional literature, Fred E. Fiedler and Frederick W. Gibson (2010) found that intellectual ability contributed little to performance among leaders who possessed poorer stress tolerance (i.e., low hardiness) while subjected to greater levels of situational stress. Conversely, for participants who possessed higher resiliency, greater intellectual ability tended to have a meaningful impact on leadership performance, especially as responsibilities increased.²¹ One possible explanation for this dynamic is that increased anxiety or stress places greater strain on an individual’s ability to concentrate on more complex tasks as commonly required in leadership positions of greater responsibility. Therefore, individuals who possess higher resiliency are better equipped to moderate the effects of stress, allowing for greater commitment of their intellectual resources to their job demands.

Another important factor in the manifestation of intellect in relation to leadership performance is EI. Similar to resiliency, general intelligence has little impact on a leader’s performance unless he or she possesses some of the social and interpersonal skills necessary in motivating and directing

a group to a common objective. Paul T. Bartone, Jarle Eid, and Scott Snook’s study (2009) found that leader performance was best predicted by a combination of intellectual abilities, hardiness, and social judgment (i.e., EI) versus intellectual abilities alone. This empirical data suggests that while intellectual capacity is an important attribute in a model of leadership, it must be complemented by other factors in order to make a meaningful contribution to overall performance.

Contextual Factors to Effective Leadership

As seen in the discussion up to this point, much of the past research on leadership has primarily centered on the individual traits, abilities, or characteristics of effective leaders. Field Manual 6-22 is no different, with its primary focus on the individual characteristics and behaviors an Army leader is expected to demonstrate in order to be most effective. However, more recent research indicates this preoccupation on the individual leader is missing a powerful contributor to effective leadership: social contextual factors. This substantive area of empirical interest strongly suggests that what matters most with regard to leader efficacy is not only possessing a set of certain qualities but also having a relationship between leaders and followers.²² Although individual traits and competencies should not be ignored in establishing a model for leadership, failure to understand and integrate the social context of leadership into a model is omitting a critical aspect of the formula used to calculate competent leadership.

In conducting extensive research on this issue, S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow (2011) determined that context played a more significant role than individual traits as emphasized by more traditional views on leadership efficacy. More specifically, they discovered three critical factors to effective, influential leadership. The first factor they identified is that leaders must be viewed by their followers as highly representative of their group. This point may seem patently obvious, but often leaders fail in this respect simply because they do not recognize or understand their group’s identity and they fail to see the value in closely aligning themselves with the group they supposedly represent.²³



(DOD, SGT Matt Young)

Soldiers of 3rd Platoon, Apache Company, 1st Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, step off on a foot patrol with CSM Frank A. Grippe, command senior enlisted leader for U.S. Central Command, in the Panjwai District of southern Afghanistan, 22 September 2012.

In elaborating further, these researchers found that the more an individual is viewed by group members as “one of us,” the more influential he or she will be within the group and consequently, the more willing other group members will be to follow the leader’s direction. One of the most important areas of interest within the field of leadership is to understand why and how some people within a group become more influential than others. As seen in much of the past research, many researchers have sought to address this issue by identifying a set of specific qualities—attributes and behaviors like those in FM 6-22—that aspiring leaders need to display to differentiate themselves from their followers. In contrast, Haslam, Reicher, and Platow’s analysis suggests that prospective leaders’ primary goal should not be to differentiate themselves from those they seek to lead, but seek to emphasize their commonalities.²⁴

There are a broad range of studies that have demonstrated that the most prototypical members of a group are the most influential and that, given a choice, their fellow group members will often prefer leaders who display in-group prototypical characteristics ahead of those who display qualities that are stereotypical of leaders in general.²⁵ For example, one study explored leader influence on separate groups whose members either perceived the leader as similar to them (“friendly,” “easy going,” and “tolerant”) or different (“intellectual,” “high achieving,” and “serious”). The researchers found that when group members perceived the leader as embodying the characteristics of the group, the leader was rated as more influential and charismatic, even though the leader lacked characteristics commonly associated with effective leaders (e.g., “high achieving,” “intellectual”). Researchers found this to be particularly true if those leaders appeared to demonstrate greater

interest in the group and framed their leadership in transformational rather than transactional terms.²⁶

A second critical factor in effective leadership identified by Haslam, Reicher, and Platow is that leaders must be viewed by their followers as an “in-group champion”—an individual who exerts considerable effort for the greater good of the group. To engage followers in a powerful and influential way, leaders’ actions and visions must promote group interests consistent with the norms and values for that particular group. Similar to the last factor, this point may seem rather obvious, but again, many leaders fail to understand it and, more importantly, fail to apply it. According to the researchers, the key to this factor is not a leader exerting great effort on behalf of his or her group, but one exerting effort *within* the framework of the group’s own norms and values.²⁷ To accomplish this objective, aspiring leaders must first understand their group’s identity as well as the concept of social identity—a term that relates to an individual’s self-concept derived from group membership distinct from other groups.²⁸

To illustrate this factor, the Army is a large organization with its own set of well-established values and standards. While most of these values are explicit and standardized, there are many different units within the Army that possess their own unique group norms and values as well as distinct group identities from which members derive a significant aspect of their self-concept (i.e., social identity). For example, the 101st Airborne Division, 3rd Brigade “Rakkasans” possesses an identity distinct from other infantry units in the Army to include other brigades from the 101st Airborne Division. This unique group identity serves to communicate a positive distinctness from other groups, which serves to affirmatively shape the self-concepts of each soldier who is a member of the unit. Further, within the Rakkasans, each battalion, company, platoon, and squad possess slightly different group identities from which soldiers further derive significance. While an infantry officer from another unit can be very successful within the Rakkasans, his success as a leader is most likely predicated upon understanding the group’s unique identity as well as the unique values and norms that govern it, not his simply exerting great effort on behalf of the group.

To extend this point, research strongly suggests that leaders who are perceived by their followers

in this way glean a number of important benefits. In addition to receiving endorsements from their followers, they are likely to be viewed as charismatic, influential, and much more capable of enlisting the efforts of their followers in bringing their visions for the group to fruition.²⁹ These are all important elements to being an effective leader, but their achievement is based upon a leader’s understanding of the group’s social identity and advocating consistently within the norms and values of the group.

Finally, Haslam, Reicher, and Platow identified that effective leaders actively construct an identity for their group that is translated into reality. Research in this area indicates effective leaders are not permanently bound to a group’s identity where they simply operate within its boundaries, but they become masters of it. In support of this point, history has repeatedly demonstrated that the most effective

To engage followers in a powerful and influential way, leaders’ actions and visions must promote group interests consistent with the norms and values for that particular group.

leaders create and shape their groups’ identities, and consequently, those identities create and shape institutions, organizations, and entire societies. These leaders accomplish this by recognizing that a group of people with a shared identity possesses much more power than people without it. Indeed, one of the central reasons why great leadership is so admired is that it gives evidence to the simple fact that history is not made by groups with the greatest resources or numbers, but by those groups whose energies have been galvanized by leaders into the most coherent social force. These leaders take the ideas, values, and priorities of the group and translate them into reality. In analyzing this factor, research strongly suggests that group identity is the source of this coherence and transformation, and therefore, for leaders, it is the most powerful of all leadership resources.³⁰

In addition to empirical support, military history is filled with examples that demonstrate this factor in action. For instance, the British commander William Slim, during World War II, took over the 14th Army in Burma at a time when it was defeated, in disarray, and composed of soldiers from very different nationalities. When he assumed command, the 14th Army's identity was best expressed in its informal name, "The Forgotten Army." However, in spite of these tremendous challenges, under Slim's leadership the 14th Army in Burma eventually became highly successful against the Japanese.³¹ Another example is Matthew Ridgeway taking command of the 8th Army in South Korea in December 1950. Similar to Slim, Ridgeway took over a multinational army that was defeated, fragmented, and possessing poor morale. However, like the 14th Army under Slim, the 8th Army obtained considerable success under Ridgeway's leadership.³²

While Ridgeway and Slim possessed different personalities, leadership styles, and leader characteristics, one of their first courses of action after taking command was to understand their groups' identity and to begin aggressively reshaping it in a positive way.³³ Both these leaders supported these actions through establishing a vision for their respective groups and creating the organizational structures necessary to translate their army's reshaped identity into reality. They recognized in their men that in spite of their past failures, they innately desired to be successful, to attain victory, and to accomplish the worthwhile. Both leaders effectively tapped this desire in order to form a new identity. Extensive research on social identity and leadership suggests it is highly unlikely that either of these leaders would have been nearly as successful without understanding the group's identity, recognizing the critical need to reshape it, and implementing the necessary actions to translate the reshaped identity into reality.³⁴

Potential Improvements to the Army's Model of Leadership

Reflecting on this relevant empirical information presents a number of important opportunities for improving the Army's present model. First, while FM 6-22 identifies several leadership attributes consistent with leadership efficacy, greater emphasis should be placed on certain characteristics that clearly possess a strong empirical relationship to

it. The most significant is the attribute of resiliency. To the Army's credit, it recognized the importance of this leadership characteristic by including it in the most recent version of FM 6-22. However, the manual devoted only four brief paragraphs to this attribute and primarily framed its application around combat. Within the empirical literature on leadership, the characteristic of resiliency or hardiness possesses one of the strongest relationships to leadership efficacy. Further, the data suggests that the positive manifestation of other leadership qualities like intellect is primarily tied to the possession of strong resiliency. Resiliency also contains a much broader application beyond combat in the execution of competent leadership. The majority of leaders in the Army will not directly experience combat; nonetheless, positions of leadership in the Army possess considerable demands and responsibility that require substantive resiliency to produce positive and lasting results. The Army leadership model needs a more balanced emphasis on leadership characteristics to reflect this research.

Second, the empirical information suggests that the Army should consider reconceptualizing its major categories within the leadership model. Presently, FM 6-22 divides 12 leadership attributes into three categories consisting of leader character, presence, and intellectual capacity. While the FM logically places most of the attributes within these three categories, the placement of empathy and interpersonal tact in their present categories does not fit conceptually within their respective domains. For example, when considering intellectual capacity, the attributes of mental agility, judgment, innovation, and domain knowledge are conceptually linked; however, interpersonal tact represents a different skill domain from intellectual capacity. Research indicates that interpersonal tact as reflected by emotional intelligence measures a different skill set from intellect.³⁵ An individual with low intellectual ability is unlikely to demonstrate much mental agility, innovative thinking, and the ability to effectively assess complex situations and formulate sound decisions on limited information (i.e., the attribute of sound judgment). However, the same individual could still potentially possess high interpersonal tact. The same argument could be directed toward the inclusion of empathy under leader presence. Both empathy and interpersonal

tact are much more conceptually linked to emotional intelligence. Given the importance of EI within the empirical literature, empathy and interpersonal tact should be placed within a separate domain, which would also provide more appropriate emphasis to their importance in competent leadership.

Finally, the empirical information on leadership suggests that the Army's model should place much greater emphasis on leaders understanding and utilizing social contextual factors. Although FM 6-22 provides some emphasis on the relationship between leaders and followers within leader competencies, the model is ultimately leader-centric, suggesting the foundation of competent leadership begins with an individual possessing certain attributes. As indicated in the last section, the research does not support this approach to establishing a model of leadership. A balanced model of leadership clearly needs to incorporate the understanding and application of group identity to produce the most effective outcomes for an organization. Undoubtedly, the attributes contained in FM 6-22 are important to effective leadership; however, an effective leader also recognizes, understands, and actively shapes their group's identity consistent with organizational values, norms, and goals. Although FM 6-22 does an excellent job in

explicitly communicating leadership standards, it is ultimately negligent in applying appropriate and balanced emphasis on empirically based factors of leadership.

A Comprehensive Model

Field Manual 6-22 provides a valuable and comprehensive model for understanding leadership and the competencies required to be successful as a leader in the Army. However, an analysis of relevant empirical literature suggest that the model needs to change to better reflect the factors necessary for developing the most effective leaders. While the model stresses several leadership attributes that are empirically based, the Army's model requires greater emphasis on certain characteristics (e.g., resiliency, EI) that possess the strongest empirical relationship to leadership efficacy. Further, more recent research on leadership psychology stresses the significance of social contextual factors; however, FM 6-22 has not fully incorporated this critical data into the model's conceptual framework. Although the Army's model relies upon valuable information in formulating the basis for competent leadership, this review indicates that the next revision needs to integrate greater empirical data to establish the best model for influential, competent leadership. **MR**

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